

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA**

|                               |   |                                   |
|-------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| <b>AMY MCBRIDE,</b>           | : | <b>Civil No. 1:13-CV-2336</b>     |
|                               | : |                                   |
| <b>Plaintiff,</b>             | : | <b>(Chief Judge Conner)</b>       |
|                               | : |                                   |
| <b>v.</b>                     | : | <b>(Magistrate Judge Carlson)</b> |
|                               | : |                                   |
| <b>LEBANON COUNTY</b>         | : |                                   |
| <b>COMMISSIONERS, et al.,</b> | : |                                   |
|                               | : |                                   |
| <b>Defendant.</b>             | : |                                   |

**REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

**I.     Statement of Facts and of The Case**

This is a *pro se* civil rights case that was first brought by a county prisoner through the filing of a complaint on September 9, 2013. (Doc. 1.) McBride's initial *pro se* complaint was a spare, terse 3-page document which listed various county officials in York and Lebanon County as defendants, and then demanded injunctive relief in the form of an order directing that these prison officials provide law libraries that are equivalent to those provided to federal prisoners. While making these demands, McBride's complaint was otherwise completely devoid of any factual averments. (Doc.1) Thus, McBride demanded extraordinary injunctive relief, but described no facts giving rise to a cause of action. (Id.) Because this document was unadorned by any accompanying facts, we could not identify or ascertain what

McBride may have been trying to allege in this pleading, and, therefore, recommended that the plaintiff's motion for leave to proceed *in forma pauperis* be granted but that this complaint be dismissed without prejudice to the plaintiff endeavoring to correct the defects cited in this Report and Recommendation, provided that the plaintiff acted within 20 days of any dismissal order. (Doc. 7)

While this recommendation was pending before the district court, McBride filed a document which has been construed as an amended complaint. (Doc. 8) This document provided much needed essential factual detail to McBride's complaints regarding access to legal materials at the Lebanon County Prison, addressing one of the concerns identified in our initial Report and Recommendation. However, the amended complaint, which only seeks injunctive relief, reveals that McBride is no longer housed in the York County Prison, and has not been held in that facility since May of 2012. (Doc. 8, ¶8)

In light of the filing of this amended complaint, upon a supplemental screening review of the pleading, it is recommended that the complaint be served upon the Lebanon County defendants, but dismissed as moot with respect to the York County defendants since it is undisputed that McBride seeks injunctive relief but is no longer housed in that prison.

## **II. Discussion**

### **A. Screening of *Pro Se In forma Pauperis* Complaints–Standard of Review**

This Court has an on-going statutory obligation to conduct a preliminary review of *pro se* complaints brought by plaintiffs given leave to proceed *in forma pauperis* in cases which seek redress against government officials. Specifically, we are obliged to review the complaint pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915A which provides, in pertinent part:

**(a) Screening.** - The court shall review, before docketing, if feasible or, in any event, as soon as practicable after docketing, a complaint in a civil action in which a prisoner seeks redress from a governmental entity or officer or employee of a governmental entity.

**(b) Grounds for dismissal.** - On review, the court shall identify cognizable claims or dismiss the complaint, or any portion of the complaint, if the complaint-

(1) is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted; or

(2) seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.

Under Section 1915A, the court must assess whether a *pro se* complaint “fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.” This statutory text mirrors the language of Rule 12(b)(6) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which provides

that a complaint should be dismissed for “failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6).

With respect to this benchmark standard for legal sufficiency of a complaint, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has aptly noted the evolving standards governing pleading practice in federal court, stating that:

Standards of pleading have been in the forefront of jurisprudence in recent years. Beginning with the Supreme Court's opinion in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007) continuing with our opinion in Phillips [v. County of Allegheny], 515 F.3d 224, 230 (3d Cir. 2008)] and culminating recently with the Supreme Court's decision in Ashcroft v. Iqbal –U.S.–, 129 S.Ct. 1937 (2009) pleading standards have seemingly shifted from simple notice pleading to a more heightened form of pleading, requiring a plaintiff to plead more than the possibility of relief to survive a motion to dismiss.

Fowler v. UPMC Shadyside, 578 F.3d 203, 209-10 (3d Cir. 2009).

In considering whether a complaint fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, the court must accept as true all allegations in the complaint and all reasonable inferences that can be drawn from the complaint are to be construed in the light most favorable to the plaintiff. Jordan v. Fox Rothschild, O'Brien & Frankel, Inc., 20 F.3d 1250, 1261 (3d Cir. 1994). However, a court “need not credit a complaint’s bald assertions or legal conclusions when deciding a motion to dismiss.” Morse v. Lower Merion Sch. Dist., 132 F.3d 902, 906 (3d Cir. 1997). Additionally a court need not “assume that a ... plaintiff can prove facts that the ... plaintiff has not

alleged.” Associated Gen. Contractors of Cal. v. California State Council of Carpenters, 459 U.S. 519, 526 (1983). As the Supreme Court held in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007), in order to state a valid cause of action a plaintiff must provide some factual grounds for relief which “requires more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of actions will not do.” Id. at 555. “Factual allegations must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level.” Id.

In keeping with the principles of Twombly, the Supreme Court has underscored that a trial court must assess whether a complaint states facts upon which relief can be granted when ruling on a motion to dismiss. In Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662 (2009), the Supreme Court held that, when considering a motion to dismiss, a court should “begin by identifying pleadings that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.” Id. at 679. According to the Supreme Court, “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.” Id. at 678. Rather, in conducting a review of the adequacy of complaint, the Supreme Court has advised trial courts that they must:

[B]egin by identifying pleadings that because they are no more than conclusions are not entitled to the assumption of truth. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be supported by factual allegations. When there are well-pleaded factual

allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief.

Id. at 679.

Thus, following Twombly and Iqbal a well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere legal labels and conclusions. Rather, a complaint must recite factual allegations sufficient to raise the plaintiff's claimed right to relief beyond the level of mere speculation. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has stated:

[A]fter Iqbal, when presented with a motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim, district courts should conduct a two-part analysis. First, the factual and legal elements of a claim should be separated. The District Court must accept all of the complaint's well-pleaded facts as true, but may disregard any legal conclusions. Second, a District Court must then determine whether the facts alleged in the complaint are sufficient to show that the plaintiff has a "plausible claim for relief." In other words, a complaint must do more than allege the plaintiff's entitlement to relief. A complaint has to "show" such an entitlement with its facts.

Fowler, 578 F.3d at 210-11.

In practice, consideration of the legal sufficiency of a complaint entails a three-step analysis: "First, the court must 'tak[e] note of the elements a plaintiff must plead to state a claim.' Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1947. Second, the court should identify allegations that, 'because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.' Id. at 1950. Finally, 'where there are well-pleaded factual

allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement for relief.’ *Id.*” *Santiago v. Warminster Tp.*, 629 F.3d 121, 130 (3d Cir. 2010).

In addition to these pleading rules, a civil complaint must comply with the requirements of Rule 8(a) of the Federal Rule of Civil Procedure which defines what a complaint should say and provides that:

(a) A pleading that states a claim for relief must contain (1) a short and plain statement of the grounds for the court’s jurisdiction, unless the court already has jurisdiction and the claim needs no new jurisdictional support; (2) a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief; and (3) a demand for the relief sought, which may include relief in the alternative or different types of relief.

Thus, a well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere legal labels and conclusions. Rather, a *pro se* plaintiff’s complaint must recite factual allegations which are sufficient to raise the plaintiff’s claimed right to relief beyond the level of mere speculation, set forth in a “short and plain” statement of a cause of action.

**B. McBride’s request for injunctive relief from the York County Prison is moot since she is no longer housed in that facility**

In our view, McBride’s amended complaint now states adequate well-pleaded facts to be served upon the Lebanon County defendants, but still fails with respect to the York County defendants. The nature of this failure is both simple and profound. To the extent that McBride brings an action against the York County Prison seeking

injunctive relief against prison officials, her complaint continues to encounter an insurmountable obstacle—the mootness doctrine.

The power of the court to issue injunctions is limited and circumscribed by the mootness doctrine. The mootness doctrine recognizes a fundamental truth in litigation: “[i]f developments occur during the course of adjudication that eliminate a plaintiff’s personal stake in the outcome of a suit or prevent a court from being able to grant the requested relief, the case must be dismissed as moot.” Blanciak v. Allegheny Ludlum Corp., 77 F.3d 690, 698-99 (3d Cir. 1996). In this particular case, McBride seeks injunctive relief against officials at the York County Prison, yet it is entirely undisputed that McBride is no longer in these defendants’ custody and, therefore, no longer receives services from the prison defendants named in this case.

This simple fact raises a threshold, and insurmountable, obstacle to McBride maintaining this injunctive action against the York County defendants when the plaintiff is no longer incarcerated at the York County Prison. Upon consideration, we conclude that McBride’s requests for injunctive relief from the York County Prison are moot since she is not housed at that facility. In this setting, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has aptly observed that, when addressing inmate requests for injunctive relief:

As a preliminary matter, we must determine whether the inmates' claims are moot because “a federal court has neither the power to render



advisory opinions nor to decide questions that cannot affect the rights of litigants in the case before them.” Preiser v. Newkirk, 422 U.S. 395, 401 (1975) (quotations omitted); see also Abdul-Akbar v. Watson, 4 F.3d 195, 206 (3d Cir.1993). An inmate's transfer from the facility complained of generally moots the equitable and declaratory claims. Abdul-Akbar, 4 F.3d at 197 (former inmate's claim that the prison library's legal resources were constitutionally inadequate was moot because plaintiff was released five months before trial).

Sutton v. Rasheed, 323 F.3d 236, 248 (3d Cir. 2003). See Griffin v. Beard, No. 09-4404, 2010 WL 4642961 (3d Cir. Nov. 17, 2010)(transfer from SCI Huntingdon renders inmate injunctive relief claim moot). Indeed, as this Court has previously observed, in a case such as this, where an inmate seeks injunctive relief against her jailers but is no longer housed at the prison where these injunctive claims arose:

[H]is request[] to enjoin the defendants from interfering with his [rights] is academic. See Muslim v. Frame, 854 F.Supp. 1215, 1222 (E.D.Pa.1994). In other words, [the prisoner-plaintiff's] transfer to another institution moots any claims for injunctive or declaratory relief. See Abdul-Akbar v. Watson, 4 F.3d 195, 206-07 (3d Cir.1993); Weaver v. Wilcox, 650 F.2d 22, 27 (3d Cir.1981).

Fortes v. Harding, 19 F.Supp.2d 323, 326 (M.D.Pa.1998).

These principles control here, and compel dismissal of this prayer for injunctive relief with respect to the York County defendants as moot since McBride is no longer housed at the York County Prison.

### **III. Recommendation**

Accordingly, for the foregoing reasons, the plaintiff's motion for leave to proceed *in forma pauperis* (Doc. 2) is GRANTED, and IT IS RECOMMENDED that the plaintiff's amended complaint be served upon the Lebanon County defendants, but IT IS FURTHER RECOMMENDED that the plaintiff's amended complaint be dismissed as moot with respect to the York County defendants.

The Parties are further placed on notice that pursuant to Local Rule 72.3:

Any party may object to a magistrate judge's proposed findings, recommendations or report addressing a motion or matter described in 28 U.S.C. § 636 (b)(1)(B) or making a recommendation for the disposition of a prisoner case or a habeas corpus petition within fourteen (14) days after being served with a copy thereof. Such party shall file with the clerk of court, and serve on the magistrate judge and all parties, written objections which shall specifically identify the portions of the proposed findings, recommendations or report to which objection is made and the basis for such objections. The briefing requirements set forth in Local Rule 72.2 shall apply. A judge shall make a de novo determination of those portions of the report or specified proposed findings or recommendations to which objection is made and may accept, reject, or modify, in whole or in part, the findings or recommendations made by the magistrate judge. The judge, however, need conduct a new hearing only in his or her discretion or where required by law, and may consider the record developed before the magistrate judge, making his or her own determination on the basis of that record. The judge may also receive further evidence, recall witnesses or recommit the matter to the magistrate judge with instructions.

Submitted this 9th day of October 2013.

*S/Martin C. Carlson*

Martin C. Carlson

United States Magistrate Judge